Interview by David Shenk

David Does Brazil

Head Head David Byrne took time off from being arty to explore the music of Brazil, on record and film. He made a great album, a documentary, and raised some thorny cultural questions. We asked them.

Either the world is shrinking or David Byrne is getting bigger. Lately, he seems to be coming to us from all different places—Africa, Paris, Moscow, New York and now, Brazil.

And he didn't even pick up a guitar for this last one. *Brazil Classics 1: Beleza Tropical*, compiled by Byrne, is a representative sampling of sounds from Brazil's *tropicalismo* musical tradition, which in the early 70s helped to spiritually and intellectually uplift a generation of Brazilians and inspire a repressive government crackdown in the process, ultimately causing many musicians, like Gilberto Gil (see page 78), to go into exile.

Byrne spent several months in Brazil shooting a documentary on the *candomblé* religion; the program will have its American debut on public television July 5. In addition, he has already put together *Brazil Classics 2* and *3*, featuring music from the *samba* and *forro* traditions respectively, which will come out in the next few months.

Oh, and one more thing. If you see Byrne on the street, or in a record store, congratulate him. At press time, he was still waiting; but as you read this, he's a brand new dad.

SPIN: In his liner notes to this album, Arto Lindsay talked about the political and cultural importance of music to the Brazilian people. Put plainly, is music more important to the people there than it is here?
BYRNE: It has a real meaning there, it is speaking directly to those people. It's reflecting their values and what they think about the way they live, about their hopes and fears and all that kind of stuff. Contemporary pop just doesn't do that anymore in this country or in Europe. It tries to, but everybody knows it's just a commodity now, another thing that you consume.

What is your relationship with these musicians? Do you know any of them?
I know a few of them. Not all of them, but a few.

Did you discuss the project with any of them as you were working on it? How'd they feel about being collected, packaged and stamped "David Byrne's favorite?"
They've been around for a long time. They've played in different countries all around the world before, and so it's not like this was something out of the blue that was totally a surprise to them. A lot of them are really big stars in Brazil, so it's not strange for them to have somebody say that they like their music. They were pleasantly surprised, I think, that someone from my background was doing it.

Especially because it was you who were behind this project, how did they feel about the prospect of suddenly being identified with this whole trend towards a multi-cultural music scene?
I'm sure they look at that a little bit askance, in the nobody seems to be touching it."

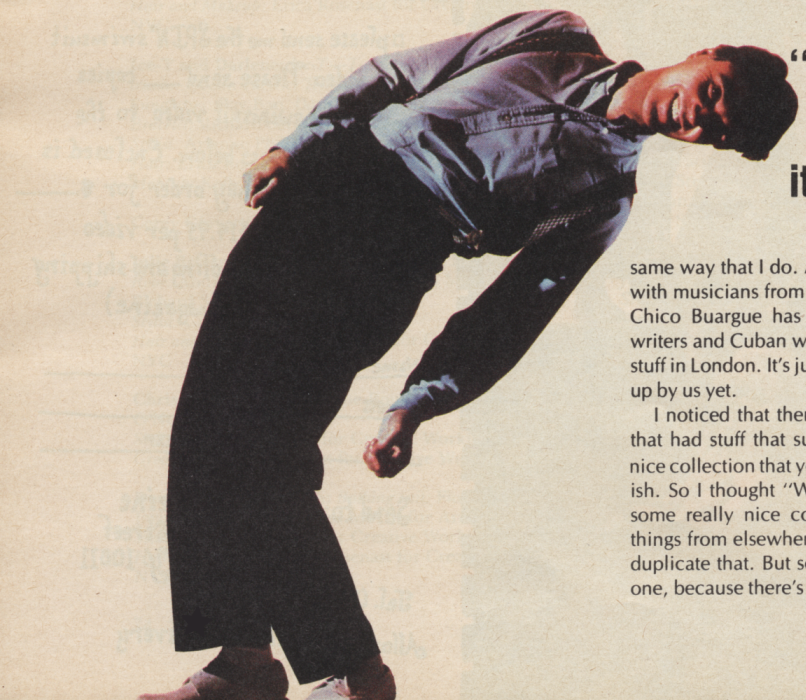
People were kind of surprised. When I originally proposed the idea, they thought that it was going to be some really obscure quirky stuff that I had discovered that I was trying to push people to listen to. It's pretty accessible.

You mentioned that many of these musicians have done some traveling. The word is that, right now, everyone wants to go to Paris. Is it true what they say about that city being the hub of international music?
Absolutely. It's been happening there for a couple of years now, and it's just exploding all over the place. That's why we recorded the last Talking Heads record there. As far as I'm concerned, Paris is really where it's happening musically right now.

So what's the very latest thing over there that hasn't hit us yet?
They're doing some rai fusion stuff. Some of the rai artists are starting to work with top western producers. We'll see how successful it is, whether it keeps the integrity of the music, or if it sounds like a sell-out.

Isn't there a danger that we're going to see a loss of national musical identities as every kind of music criss-crosses the world and various styles fuse into each other?
It depends on how they go about it, of course. There are some artists from Brazil and Africa and [various other countries] that, when they get a little bit of attention in the West, immediately want to record in English and use Hollywood production and do it real slick. They think that they're gonna crack the English market. And usually it's a big disappointment for

Chris Callis



"That's like a Westerner saying, 'O.K., stay in your what we do. Don't come into our territory and we it, more power to them, and it'll probably revitalize

same way that I do. A lot of them have collaborated with musicians from other countries for a long time. Chico Buarque has collaborated with Argentinian writers and Cuban writers. Caetano Veloso has done stuff in London. It's just that they haven't been picked up by us yet.

I noticed that there wasn't a collection available that had stuff that suited my tastes. There wasn't a nice collection that you could put on from start to finish. So I thought "Well, there's some people doing some really nice collections of African stuff, and things from elsewhere, and I certainly don't need to duplicate that. But somebody should do a Brazilian one, because there's such a wealth of stuff there, and everybody all around. Occasionally somebody can do that, but I think most of the time it fails horribly, and everybody learns their lesson and they go back to doing what is more natural.

But on the other hand, for me to say that, it's like a Westerner saying, "o.k., stay in your place. You do what you do well, but don't try and do what we do. Don't come into our territory and we won't come into yours." That's bullshit too. If they can do it, and get away with it, more power to them, and it'll probably revitalize everything all around them.

But aren't they being *brought out* of these countries much more than they're pushing themselves out?

Like when the Heads go into a country and appropriate their musical culture.
Yes, that's true. But when we do it they're already halfway to us. We were working with Africans who were living in Paris, mostly. And contrary to what a lot of Westerners might think, these people don't come out of the bush. They're not spring chickens, they know their way around the block. They can play funk music, they can play reggae, they can play rock if they want to. It's not like they've been living in a cocoon and they don't know anything else.

At any rate, it wasn't like we went to them and said, "We want you to learn how to play like us." They already knew how to do that. There was already this kind of fusion or welding that was happening, and we were kind of just throwing ourselves into the pot.

Where are things heading in this country?
I don't know, exactly. I think radio will be more fragmented. They have a name for it—"narrowcasting," isn't it? That's a television term for when the show is focused on a more specific audience. I think there'll be more of that, so there'll be one group of people that like this certain kind of music, and there'll be teenagers that will like the speed metal, and a rap audience, all that kind of stuff. And occasionally, somebody will appeal to all of them. But they can all thrive and feed off of one another and still maintain their own identity. And it won't be like one rock culture or one pop music culture, where everything has to try to appeal to everybody.

And this is a somewhat permanent change, isn't it?
Yeah, you can't really go back again to pretending

place. You do what you do well, but don't try and do won't come into yours.' If they can do it, and get away with everything all around them."

that you don't know what's going on.

Now, you've also been involved with the new Greenpeace album, *Rainbow Warriors*, which you went to the Soviet Union to promote.
That was basically a way to raise money for Greenpeace, for them to have an office in the East, and to establish a presence there. For the moment, the East is receptive to the idea. After Chernobyl, they're totally aware that the environment affects their lives—more than the people in the West are, at the moment. So they're open to the idea of an organization like Greenpeace being around and being aware of what's going on here. So this was helping to fund that.

You aren't well-known as a political activist.
I've done stuff before, I've just kept quiet about it. I did election posters years ago when Reagan was running. These anti-Reagan posters.

This goes back to the notion of lending your name to a cause, which is exactly what you're doing with these Brazil collections. You were aware of how the thing would be marketed, weren't you?
You mean that they'd put my name all over it? Yeah, a little bit.

Well, very few people would have picked up the album otherwise.
Yeah, I'm afraid that's probably true, which is why I stuck my name on it.

Do you want to see more of these celebrity endorsement albums? Does the possibility for doing some cultural good become a calling for celebrities to do this sort of thing?
I don't know. I don't think it's anybody's responsibility to do it. I was just putting together cassettes for friends, and I thought, "as long as I'm doing this, I may as well see about the possibility of releasing it."

You know, a lot of people are going to read this and say, "Hey, I thought David Byrne was some way-out, avant-garde artist. But he just seems like this progressive guy who is interested in different kinds of music and concerned about world health." You're practically one of the establishment now.
Yeah, I guess I notice that I'm getting a little bit older. But geez, a lot of these younger people are so conservative now. I still feel like I'm still out on the edge somewhere.